Should All New Buildings Reflect The Time When They Are Built?

A Critique of Contemporary (Modern and Post-Modern) Architecture

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When engaged in debates over the nature and appeal of contemporary architecture, and over how existing built environments should be extended, and new ones designed and constructed, I have frequently encountered an idea which continues to strike me as strangely rigid and severe, as well as curiously constricted with regard to the considerations that form its conceptual foundation.

I am talking about the notion that all new buildings ought to be built in such a way that they embody and reflect the spirit or the trend of the present day and age – regardless of what any local traditions or the style of any existing buildings, or the characteristics of the local environment, might appear to recommend.

According to this belief, which seems surprisingly widespread, new buildings do not need to be in keeping with the built environments that in so many cases are bound to form their surroundings or to become their neighbors, nor should they be.

The cult of the purportedly novel

In other words, the desire for the novel – or rather the *purportedly* novel, for by now, after roughly half a century of that which some label as "contemporary", others as "modern" or "postmodern", it can hardly be said to be novel anymore – and the assumption that the novel is somehow obligatory or inescapable, trump all other concerns. Even the slightest respect for that which already exists is seen as unnecessary, and calls for such respect are deemed the results of sentimentality or narrow-mindedness, or of an insufficient understanding of what architecture ought to be.

Portraying disapproval as nothing but the manifestation of some "illegitimate" or pathological sentiment is, by the way, how revolutionaries in general have long sought to disable resistance to their subversive activities – but I digress.

The necessity dogma

Moreover, this notion of **the necessity of contemporary architecture**, regardless of the circumstances, is often put forth in a surprisingly insistent way, not as a proposition that may be discussed, and that could be proven to be inappropriate to the locale in question, or at least in need of some adjustment, but as a self-evident truth that only eccentrics, simpletons and reactionaries could find it in themselves to oppose.

In my personal life, I have even come across this opinion in official guidelines for urban planning, like those issued in 2006 by the municipality where I live.

However, for the most part, **the notion** is not stated in speech or writings – it is simply there, as one of the premises that shape the choices of architects

and decision makers, but which ordinary people rarely think much about.

A premise exempted from deconstruction

Yet even a cursory look at a random selection of European or American cities, and in particular at the difference between the historic centers, or the remnants of such, and the more recent and developing fringes and suburbs, **cannot but reveal that it is a premise that is having a huge and literary growing influence** on our environment, and that is decisively impacting the nature of almost everything that is now being built.

Where is the interest in and the criticism of this situation? European and American intellectuals can often be heard praising the act of criticism, and the supposedly laudable role it has played in the making of what we now call Western culture, but why is there so little critique of **the phenomenon** described above? Why is there so limited an opposition to and so little analysis of an idea with such commanding influence? Why can the prominent thinkers that condemn the widespread extremism of contemporary architecture, and the visual breaking up of previously pleasant and harmonious built environments, be counted in single digits (Roger Scruton in Great Britain and Roger Kimball in the United States are two of the most well-known of these), while the scholars that denounce "global warming" or some other dubious "threat to the environment" seem to number in the thousands and have an influence almost everywhere?

It is this rather dire situation that is prompting me to write the piece that you are now reading. I am not doing it because I believe I have a particularly consummate understanding of the predicament we are in, or because I expect these writings of mine to have much influence, but because so very few others, and hardly any at all here where I live, are doing

anything of the kind.

Two disguised deficiencies

In my view, there are **two major problems** with the idea of the necessity of so-called contemporary architecture. They ought to be obvious, but they nevertheless seem to be overlooked by many. That includes most of those who have made it their profession to analyze the world around them, or, as some of those less than amicably inclined to such professions might say: To act as if analyzing the world is what they are doing. In any case, the problems I have in mind are rarely spelled out in any detail, even by those noble souls who do voice their concern.

The problem of untenable relativism

One of those problems is this: What the idea referred to above really means, if fully accepted, is that there are no enduring aesthetic standards worth striving to adhere to or employing as a point of departure, no lasting or eternal principles for good design, only the whims and vogues of various ages, only the fads and fetishes of assorted human beings – inventions and amusements that would vanish with the human race if it were wiped away.

To subscribe to this idea is, in other words, to claim that the architectural products of one period are just as respectable and worthy of acceptance, or just as worthless and undeserving of attention, as those of other periods. A claim which, in my view, is patently false.

The idea may, on an unexamined level, appear compelling, since it relieves people believing in it of having to choose between competing alternatives, and, even more significantly, of having to defend their decision before themselves and others when confronted with contradictory verdicts.

Moreover, if such decisions are to seem reliable to those who reach them, and be defensible when challenged, they cannot but be based on some rather lengthy and strenuous effort to acquire firsthand knowledge of that which the assessments pertain to.

Hence, to certain kinds of persons, the idea is bound to be a temping one, since it always offers a quick and easy way to avoid intellectual exertions. There is not necessarily any correspondence between attractiveness and truth, however.

Consider this: Few would make the “necessity and equality claim” if we were comparing the products in thought of different authors – such as the written works of the founders of different movements – with one another. Would anyone except a handful of deluded radicals attempt to place Socrates or Plato, Augustine or Thomas Aquinas, Edmund Burke or Adam Smith on an equal footing with Marx or Lenin, or Mao or Pol Pot, for example?

I very much doubt that even die-hard relativists would go to that extreme without some hesitation, especially now that we know what we know of what the latter category of authors and founders occasioned of upheaval and suffering.

Yet the different kinds of architecture are in fact the physical manifestations of different ways of thinking, and of different movements, and the architecture of the second half of the twentieth century (1) embodies a way of thinking that is clearly very different from, and in my view inferior to, the thinking of earlier times.

Moreover, after decades, centuries or even millennia of trials, it is quite plain what these different manifestations occasion with regard to moods, thoughts and feelings (2).

But to return to the previous point: Thus, the notion that one should build or allow to be built whatever the present age favors is a kind of relativism, springing from minds that do not believe in any hierarchy of achievement, either because they know nothing about such achievements, or because they seek to destroy the knowledge of them.

Arrogance of behalf of nihilism

These minds do not believe there is anything in the realm of the old worth continuing, perpetuating, referring to, being inspired by, respecting or even leaving alone. Hence, their relativism is also a kind of arrogance – one on behalf of the idea that nothing is more valuable than anything else – nothing except that nihilistic idea itself, which is the premise for their whole line of thought, the premise which is not seen and not criticized, the one premise which is sacred and untouchable.

It is a strange kind of arrogance, one on behalf of nothing, of the void, the black hole – an arrogance on behalf of forces that are profoundly harmful and destructive because they fail to “abhor what is evil” and to “hold fast to what is good” (Romans 12:9-21).

Such nihilism is of course, as ought to be apparent, irreconcilable with the belief in a god that is everlasting and good, but in this age of atheism, the implications of the existence of a divine being are often forgotten even by those who remain religious.

Revolutionism disguised as impartiality

However, the disdain for the inspired or religious tradition (see footnote 1), apparent in architecture that refuses to incorporate into itself any elements of that tradition, and that by such refusals insists on a break with it, is

obviously *not* a sign of relativism (a truly relativistic stance would not favor "new" or "contemporary" architecture over anything else), but rather of something else – and that something has to be a certain **set** of values that should perhaps be termed anti-values; values that are so important to those who hold them, and that inspire such haughtiness in them, that they are willing to attack anything that competes with or contradicts those values – even if it only does so by virtue of its mere existence.

Still, a number of those who advocate the relativistic view may actually believe in what they are saying. This is probably common in the case of ordinary people, laymen. They have not thought much about the implications of their claim; they are simply parroting what they have heard from others, from persons they view as having authority.

In other cases, the relativistic view is undoubtedly only the outer layer, one of the skins of the onion, so to speak – a skin covering a deep hostility toward the past and the inspired tradition, a hostility which, if it was stated plainly, would put most ordinary people off.

Hence, what looks like honest impartiality may be nothing more than a "public relations" strategy – a clever ploy, a way to sell ideas which are in actuality deeply unattractive by making them out to be about equal treatment and openmindedness – and anything that involves the word "equal" or "open" must by definition be good, right?

The problem of unavoidable aesthetic degradation

Moreover, it is simply impossible to insert a building into or place a building next to an environment consisting of radically different buildings without destroying the atmosphere and the harmony created by that existing environment. A single new building can disrupt an entire milieu of existing

buildings if that single building is drastically different from them, in much the same way that a few false notes can spoil an entire concert, and a splotch of bright color can ruin even the most masterful painting. Once present, the element that is different will commend the attention of the listener or viewer, and prevent him or her from having the experience that would have occurred if that element was absent – even if it is fairly insignificant when measured by duration or extent.

This is not an opinion, but a universal and an observable fact, arising from human nature, and from how our senses and our minds experience and analyze the world around us. Yet amazingly, it seems that the implications of this fact are no longer taken into account when permits are given, when buildings are designed or when cities are planned. Most ordinary people know very well what pleasing and inspiring built environments look like. Places that have such environments are places people fall in love with, yearn to live in and journey from afar to see. Such places are often endowed with regional, national or even global fame. Examples of globally famous ones are Rome, Florence, Venice, Paris, Oxford, Edinburgh and Prague, Washington D.C. and San Francisco. Yet for some reason, this widely diffused knowledge is rarely employed in the creation of new built environments, nor is it very often used to preserve the qualities of existing ones.

That is the interpretation of someone who does not want to believe that evil plays a role in the act of “forgetting” described above. They, that is the planners, architects and decision makers should know, but for some strange reason they do not.

However, to the intrepid eye, it cannot but become clear that cults of utility, of novelty, of ugliness and of transgression continually take precedence over any and all more healthy and moderate considerations. A more disturbing interpretation, which I suspect is the more likely one, is that the fact mentioned above *is* taken into account, but that decision makers actually

desire the destructive effect that the insertion of “contemporary” architecture so often generates – and that the nature of this desire is closely related to that which prompts perverts to engage in and be excited by bizarre and unnatural forms of sexual intercourse. The more disruptive the architecture, and the more unnatural the intercourse, the greater the sinister pleasure of those involved. The act of desecration is, as we all know if we look into our hearts, deeply satisfying to those who hate the good and sacred.

Conclusion

To conclude, I believe there are two major objections that can be made against the “whatever the age prefers”-idea. In the first place, it is a relativism that when examined is revealed as preposterous and indefensible. In the same way that ideas are of unequal quality, so are different kinds of architecture of unequal quality. Moreover, the relativism is in reality often just a cover for revolutionism, and for a deep hostility towards the existing, the old and the traditional.

In the second place, we have that even if such relativism, impartiality or neutrality was accepted as valid on a theoretical level, when thinking of the merits of different kinds of architecture, it would still be true that building according to such thinking is irreconcilable not only with the preservation of existing built environments, but with any sensible and considerate extension of them. The nature of our response to fragmentation, chaos and disharmony cannot be negated by the zealous insistence on the desirability or necessity of the “contemporary” by politicians, architects and planners. Our natural response to such changes may be delegitimized as a public utterance, or subdued for a time by revolutionary fervor, or by the conceit of youthful rashness, but it will not disappear – not as long as human nature remains as it is – and the tragic results of the adoption of the

“contemporary” will be a great loss of beauty and belonging, and of sources of happiness and consolation – a loss of milieus that could have engendered great minds and much good – a loss that was entirely avoidable, but that nevertheless happened because, to paraphrase Edmund Burke, good people did nothing and hence allowed evil to arise triumphant.

Notes

(1) I am of course aware that these broad categories contain a number of variations that many view as distinct movements, and which, in one sense, undoubtedly are precisely that. As examples of this, one could point to the numerous styles that influenced the architecture of the nineteenth century, such as Gothic or Classical, or to the series of categories applied to the architecture of the subsequent century.

Still, I believe it is evident that the waves of architectural ideas prior to the 1950s (loosely speaking), disparate as they appeared when compared **only to one another**, usually shared so many characteristics (i.e. a sense of proportion, an awareness of pleasant ratios, a striving for dignity, and often even beauty, an upward “movement” in spite of the inert components, an interest in history, and a concern for that which is pleasing, a dislike for ugliness, an admiration for the lofty, the glorious and the transcendent, an honest attempt to achieve balance, harmony and unity …) that they can be said to belong to **a single tradition**, one which might be called **the inspired, the virtue-oriented or the religious tradition**.

I also think it equally evident that there occurred a great break with this tradition over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, a break which then began to manifest itself almost everywhere in the 1950s and

1960s, and which constitutes a mindset which has continued to influence architecture ever since.

(Hence, it can be argued that all of the recent architectural waves also belong to a single “tradition”, but one which is very different from, and even opposed to, the one which it replaced.)

Furthermore, I would argue that the usual focus on certain (particular) styles, or various groups of features labeled as that, i.e. neo-gothic, obscures this essential (more important) story, which is the story of a violent and in the last millennium probably unprecedented story of a brutal and rather sudden change from one set of attitudes to another, from a long and largely positive tradition to its polar opposite. (It is one of those insights which connects parts which without it may seem quite unrelated, an insight which, once presented, allows one to grasp a greater, underlying or overarching perspective, one that makes the subject far more interesting.)

(2) The effects of different kinds of architecture on human psychology

Sources and further reading:

Hardy, Matthew 2008, *The Venice Charter Revisited: Modernism, Conservation and Tradition in the 21st Century*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne: http://www.cambridgescholars.com/download/sample/61199

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“The Venice Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites”

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